

Chapter Twenty-Six

May 3rd, 2021 – 7:23 p.m.

They hated to leave it at that, but Andy and Phil had agreed they both needed to take some time to think, and while Andy had promised he wouldn't go around talking about it with people outside of his house, he didn't say he wouldn't tell anyone in his family.

Because he absolutely knew he had to talk to someone about the whole thing, but the idea of telling Niko or Ash right now terrified him. He needed to not crush their excitement, and he couldn't imagine putting that kind of pressure on Ash just a few days before she gave birth to twins.

Andy had walked Phil to the door, where they met up with Linda and Niko, and Linda shot Andy the kind of look meant to get him to spill the beans, but Andy stood his ground and kept silent, offering her only an apologetic smile, as if he knew how frustrated she understandably was. But he knew exactly why Phil didn't want to tell her. Not yet.

As soon as they closed the door, Niko looked at him with questions in her eyes, and Andy could only sigh all over again. "I'll tell you soon enough, love, but right now, you need to focus on Matty, and we can't afford to have *both* of us distracted by this," he told her, kissing her cheek.

"Andy, we handle shit together in this household," she scolded him, putting her arm around him to hug him tightly, her face pressed against his chest, her other arm still holding Matty. "I'm not some delicate little flower you have to worry about because of her age."

He couldn't help but laugh at that. "Niko, you are ten times the badass I'll *ever* be, age be damned. You're whip smart, you're a crack shot, and you've got combat situational skills I'm *never* going to be able to pick up. This couldn't have *less* to do with your age. I very rarely ask you to trust me, but I'm asking you here, like back when you asked me to trust you about your involvement with Phil and the base. Give me a little bit of time."

"Okay Andy," she said to him, standing on her tip toes to give him a little kiss. "I trust you with my life." She pulled back from him as little Matty started to gurgle. "With both our lives. Now, go find someone in this house who you *can* talk to, before that weight drags you under." She headed away from him over towards the stairs, clearly heading up to the nursery to put Matty down for the night.

Andy clearly knew he needed to talk to someone, but it needed to be one of the wives who was not yet with child, and in fact, the further away from being with child, the better. That meant Niko, Ash and Fiona were all out, as likely was Moira, who had gotten off birth control the day after the wedding. That left Sarah, Emily and Piper. As much as he valued both Sarah and Emily's opinions, both were still a little frazzled from having finished filming, and he needed someone clear headed, and he suspected Piper's encounter at the hospital might have helped give her some clarity on this kind of thing, so he made the decision to talk with her first and see what she had to say.

The weight of the knowledge felt like it was slowly killing him, and he'd only been carrying it for minutes, not even hours.

-Where are you?- Andy texted Piper, so he would know where to go and find her in the seemingly endless house.

-Basement gym.- she texted back. -Y?-

-Need to talk. Down in a minute.-

He headed over to the stairwell, and then down the hall to the theater, where he used the latch to open the secret door, leading him down a floor further, into the actual basement of the

building, the well-concealed fortress that it was.

They'd been in the house for months before they discovered the entire secret basement floor, a sort of battle bunker constructed by the original tenant before he'd died, all the entrances and exits concealed around the manor. Once they had, Andy had been tempted to open it up and make it much less secret, but both Lexi and Niko had convinced him otherwise, saying having a secure basement added a layer of security to the place.

He closed the door behind him and headed down the hallway. There had originally been something of a romper room with a ton of open space, a slightly larger than normal bedroom without an attached bathroom, and they had simply gone about converting it into a gym, with plenty of machines for people to work out on. They were even managing to make sure Andy put in an hour or so on either a treadmill or a stationary bike five days a week, simply by installing a good-sized television in front of them and letting him watch whatever while he exercised. Even with all the exercise gear, however, the room was only about half full, leaving space for the actresses to practice fight choreography and dance choreography when they didn't want to do it in the back yard.

Andy found Piper where he expected to, over at the pull-down bars, working out her arms and shoulders. She was far stronger than he was, and when he entered the room, she set the weights back into the resting position and stood up from the machine, grabbing a towel to wipe sweat from her glistening athletic body. "What's up, babe? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I..." Andy started and then stopped speaking. "I need to talk to someone, Piper, and I think you're going to be the best candidate for it, but I need you to keep it private for a little bit."

"From people outside of the Team?"

"From *everybody*," he said. "Including the rest of the Team."

She scowled for a second, then nodded, as if deciding that if it was important enough for him to ask for her silence, she should trust him enough to give it. "Okay, let me take a very quick shower and then we'll chat."

"Thanks, Piper," Andy said. "I know it's asking a lot."

"Andy," she said with a soft smile. "I'm your wife. One of them, anyway. If not me, then who?" They headed over to the master bedroom of the floor, a sort of massive bunker-like chamber, and she headed into the bathroom in the back, turning on the shower, as she started to talk to him anyway, even as she hopped beneath the warm water. "So Phil was here? That what I heard? Does that figure into what we need to talk about?"

"It does."

"Does Linda think there's reason to be concerned?"

"Phil hasn't told Linda."

Piper opened the shower door and poked her head out, eyes wide. "He didn't tell *Linda*? And he told *you*?"

"Yep."

"I can't imagine Phil not telling Linda *anything*. Jesus Christ, Andy, what's Phil gotten you into now?" she said as she stepped back into the shower, washing herself down a little more.

"Not just me, Piper," Andy sighed, washing his hands, not because they were dirty, but just out of a sense of giving himself something to do while he waited. "All of us."

She turned off the shower and grabbed a towel. "I'll wash my hair later," she told him as she stepped out and began to towel down. Despite the fact that he'd seen her naked hundreds of times now, he never got tired of the amazing view. "You want to have a go first to clear your head? You dosed me just a couple of days ago, but I'm always down to cram an extra fuck in,"

she teased with her jock-like goofy grin.

“Honestly, my brain’s so scrambled right now, I don’t think I could get it up.”

Piper dropped the towel and moved over to Andy, wrapping her arms around him, holding him in a giant hug. He started to speak but she shushed him and let him just relax for a moment with her powerful arms wrapped around his body. He felt himself unwind just the smallest amount and after a minute or so she tilted her head towards his and their lips met, nothing intense or sexual, just an emotional moment, as if she could understand the sort of mental baggage he was lugging around. It made him feel... safe. “Whatever it is, Andy, we’ll get through it. As a family. As a Team.”

“That’s the thing, Piper,” Andy said with a chuckle as she finally unwrapped her arms from around him. “This isn’t an *immediate* problem, but it’s something that we’re gonna be feeling for a long time to come.” He watched her pull on some utilitarian panties, a sports bra, then some track pants and one of his various band t-shirts that he’d collected from concerts over the years, that particular one for a British shoegaze band called Ride. His expansive band t-shirt collection had turned into the girls’ favorite thing to raid, especially since they all claimed they could smell him on his shirts, since he’d worn them so much for so long. Some dated back twenty years. “You know, at some point if you girls keep wearing my shirts so much, they’ll smell less like me and more like you.”

“We’re all trying to smell as much like you as we can anyway, Andy,” she giggled. “Alright, where do you want to go and talk? Your office?”

“Up in the perch, if that’s okay?”

“Oh, *very* serious business, then,” she said with a tight smile that hinted at the deep concern running below the surface. “Sure, let’s go.”

They headed out of the gym and down to the elevator with a hidden access point out behind the main stairwell, taking it to the upper floor before slipping out and heading to the upstairs study with the hidden stairs behind the bookcase where Andy had just been talking to Phil earlier. As they headed up the stairs, Andy was a little surprised to see the two glasses were still out from earlier, Nicolette not having done her usual ninja routine to take them away to be washed. “If you want some of the Scotch, I wouldn’t blame you,” Andy said to her as he moved over towards the French windows that opened onto the nestled concealed patio up on the roof. He moved over to sit down on one end of the couch. “This is all going to feel pretty surreal.”

“I’m not sure how much more surreal our lives can get, babe,” she said with a slight roll of her eyes. She sat at the other end of the couch, but put her feet in Andy’s lap, which he took as a sign that she wanted a foot massage, something she’d said repeatedly that she thought Andy was good at.

“I’m going to save you the windup that Phil gave me and just cut straight down to the nitty gritty, and then you and I can talk about it, so I can figure out both how to feel and what we should be doing about it.”

“Good. I prefer ‘No Bullshit’ Andy to ‘How Do I Put This Politely?’ Andy. How bad is it?”

“Very bad. But not immediately,” he said with a sigh. “Part of what Phil’s been doing research into is the regeneration process, and it turns out, it doesn’t just happen to us in spurts – it’s happening all the time. Apparently the nanobots are constantly fixing our reproductive systems, which they’d sort of figured out early, but now they also think it’s slowing our aging processes down.”

“Oh, so we’ll live longer?” Piper said, stretching her legs out a little, wiggling her feet in

his lap, so he started rubbing them. “By how much?”

“Well, it depends on the size of the Team, but for people in a Team of our size? Phil says for about every year that passes, we’re only aging a normal person’s equivalent of two months.”

She stopped wiggling her feet at that, and her eyes went wide. “You’re shitting me, Andy.”

“I am not.”

“I’m going to live to see two hundred?”

“Easily, barring unnatural causes of death.”

“So what’s the problem?” she asked with a laugh. “That sounds awesome.”

“It’s not something we’re passing on to children.”

That laugh died in its tracks. “That *can’t* be right.”

“I only have Phil’s word for it right now, but he says the data’s pretty conclusive. The kids, *our* kids, they’re aging normally.”

“Well, maybe that’s just because they’re in the growth stages,” Piper said. “You wouldn’t want to have an infant for twenty years, now, would you?”

“Like I said, Phil doesn’t seem to think it’s just that, but maybe you’re right. We’ll definitely know within just a few months with Matty.”

“This is why you didn’t want to talk to Ash or Niko about it, isn’t it?” she asked him, suddenly understanding the weight he was under.

He nodded somberly. “Niko just gave birth to Matty, and Ash is ready to pop any minute now. They’ve got plenty on their minds already, and this... this isn’t going away. It’ll be here a week from now, a month from now... and they won’t even start to notice for at least a few years. But I don’t like keeping secrets from the women I love.”

“Keep that in mind, baby,” Piper said, scooting over a little more, resting her calves in his lap, to let him not have to continue rubbing her feet. “This is a problem we’re going to be living with for *decades*. And quite a lot can change in decades. Tell me shit hasn’t changed a ton over the last thirty years. What was the internet like thirty years ago?”

“Oh god!” Andy laughed. “You had to use the phone line to access it, and it made this horrible screeching noise when you connected. It took forever to get anything with pictures in it, if you could even get that. It was mostly just text, what they called electronic bulletin board systems. I wasn’t really allowed on them, but I remember my brother Matt used to use them all the time. By the time I was in high school, we were playing Starcraft and the like on dialup still, but the idea of plugging the Internet directly to the house was starting to sound less and less like a silly idea.”

“Telephones thirty years ago?”

“Hardlines into the wall, although ‘cordless’ phones were a new thing, if your family had a bit of money to pass around. Couldn’t move more than ten, fifteen feet from where it was plugged into, unless you had one, but if you did, you could get maybe thirty or forty feet away from the base.”

“Televisions thirty years ago?”

“Ha! They were massive boxes as big as a desk. You had to build a cabinet to set them on, they were so damn heavy.”

“You see what I mean, Andy?” Piper sighed. “Things change *fast*, much faster than any of us see coming. It’s good to know about this problem, but you can’t let it consume your every moment. Not so far down the line. *We* can’t let it do that to us. I’m concerned. Of course I’m concerned. But the problem, *this* problem? We have time. In fact, that sounds like the one thing

we've got *lots* of."

"I'm scared of how Niko's going to take it, how Ash is going to take it, shit, how *Fi's* going to take it," Andy said.

"And you?" Piper asked, sliding her feet off his lap, moving over to put her arm around Andy's shoulders, pulling him in close. "How are *you* taking it?"

Andy smiled, a singular tear running down his cheek. "I'm... I'm fucking *scared*, Piper," he said, his words a little uneven. "More scared than I've been during any of this. And I know how silly that sounds, being scared of *living*? But life's *meant* to have an expiration date. It's *meant* to end. And I'm excited to see my son and my daughters have all their firsts. Take their first steps. Say their first words. But asking me to be around to see their final moments?" He shook his head. "I'm not ready for that. I don't think any father is."

"Hey, you've got a long, *long* time before any of that is even a remote possibility, okay?" she said, pressing her forehead to his. "We gotta get through *raising* the kids before you worry about them growing *old*, okay? And it's going to be scary. I get that. But that's life. This? This is just another curve ball that we're going to have to learn to live with, or eventually beat."

"What if—"

"Andy! This world is too fucking short for what ifs, what might bes and maybes, so you need to focus on the here and now," she said, holding him closely. "We take it one day at a time, okay? And if you need a rock right now, you've been mine long enough that it's my turn. I can be *your* rock. I can carry you as long as it takes."

He held onto her, her arms wrapped around him protectively, and she let him cry for a while. He hadn't realized it, but the pressure had been building up inside of him like a timebomb, and once the tears started flowing, he just couldn't stop them. The shock, the grief, the weight of it all, it just exploded within him.

He cried for a while, much longer than he'd anticipated, but he'd been overwhelmed with all of it, running purely on emptiness and fumes for long, far too long to be healthy, his mind tasked with issues too big, too overwhelming to even contemplate. He couldn't even imagine how Phil felt.

Andy was completely at a loss. He didn't know any magic words to make himself or anyone else feel better, or to make the pain that was shredding up his soul fade. He wanted, he *needed*, everything to fade. Not for good. Just for a moment. For a while. To clear his head.

He hadn't bawled like this since his brother had died last year, and as always, Andy was a very quiet crier, his tears running down heavy but his mouth not making much of a sound.

Somewhere in the middle of it, Piper started crying too, and the two of them just held onto each other until the sadness passed, at least for a little while.

What felt like an eternity later, the two of them started to pull themselves back together, and they took a few minutes to clean up. She was right, unsurprisingly. They had *time*. They had plenty of time, and waiting a few months to tell the women in his life who were just enjoying the new lives they'd brought into the world, well, that seemed like only fair. He didn't want to crush their moments of joy, but he also didn't want to prolong keeping secrets from his partners. He hoped they would understand why when the time finally came to cross that bridge.

After that, Piper did something she'd never really done before – she asked him how his writing was going. Not in depth, anyway. She'd ask about it in passing here and there, but it was never intended to be a deep conversation point between the two of them, not before now. He could tell this time it was meant to deflect away from the tension, but she also seemed genuinely interested in how the process was coming along, and now she'd even read some of the Druid

Gunslinger books, so when he was talking through what he was considering for some of the characters, she actually had a frame of reference for who most of them were, even if she hadn't read the whole series.

From there, he asked about her training, and they spent fifteen minutes or so talking about how glad Piper was that her birth control held, because she wanted to participate in the first Olympics once they started up again. She'd begun pushing herself back into the hard part of training, and despite the fact that she felt like she healed faster now, she also felt like maybe she wasn't pushing as hard as she could or should be doing. She asked Andy if he wouldn't mind being her coach one or two days a week. Not for the full day, but an hour or two of motivation would be a great help, something he didn't mind doing.

It was everything they could do to avoid talking about the big ugly sword hanging over their heads.

But after they'd been talking a bit, Andy was surprised to feel his wrist vibrating, which meant his phone was ringing in silence just across the room. He hopped up and glanced at the name and picture on the screen – it was Lexi. They'd been talking long enough that it had fallen dark outside, and he suspected it was just Lexi checking in on why they'd missed dinner. He immediately answered the phone, because that's what he'd been trained to do. "What's up, Lex?"

"You're with Piper right now, sir?"

Andy felt his sphincter clench. It was a sort of unspoken code that when Lexi called him 'sir,' it meant he needed to snap to and pay attention. He'd asked her not to do it enough times that when she did, he knew it meant she needed him at his most focused. "I am."

"Is Muninn with you?"

Andy glanced over at the windowsill and saw that, indeed, one of his two cats had snuck in when he'd been coming or going, and was asleep there. "He is."

"Can you bring him and Piper downstairs please?"

"Is ev—"

"Now, if you could, sir?"

"Alright, to which room?"

"The bunker, sir."

"On our way." He hung up the phone and it immediately rung again with Lexi's face on it, so he answered it again. "Yes?"

"Keep your phone on, sir, and put it on speakerphone, if you would?"

"...alright." Andy tapped on the speakerphone button as he gestured for Piper to grab the cat. "Can I ask wha—"

"As soon as you're down here, sir, I'll tell you."

"Do we—"

"I'm just outside of the staircase, sir, and all the rest of the Team is in the bunker. Sarah grabbed your laptop on her way down. Let's go."

"What's going on?" Piper asked.

"Tell you shortly," Lexi's voice said via speakerphone.

Piper scooped up the indignant cat into her arms, but other than a grumbling meow, he made no further protests nor attempts to escape, mostly falling back asleep immediately, just in the athlete's arms instead this time. Andy wedged his phone microphone end up into the left front pocket of his jeans. Then the two of them headed down the stairs and quietly opened the hidden bookcase door, seeing Lexi and Melody both outside, both holding HK33's at the ready.

"Can I hang up my phone yet?" Andy asked Lexi.

“Negative,” Lexi answered, tucking her own phone into her back pocket. “Niko’s listening in on the call from the bunker. Once we’re down there, I’ll explain everything.” She’d turned off all the lights in the room, and had a flashlight attached to the end of her barrel. “Until then, please keep your right hand on my right shoulder, follow in behind me, and don’t make a sound.”

As they started to move through the mansion, Andy couldn’t help but notice for the first time since they’d moved into the house almost a year ago, everything was completely off, and the house was pitch black. He could feel Piper hooking one of her fingers in the back belt loop of his jeans, and the four of them were moving in a tight formation down the hall and over to the stairwell. Instead of going down the stairs, though, Lexi moved to open the secret door leading to the elevator to take them down to the basement. They stepped in, closing the door behind them, pushing the button, as the elevator quietly began to lower them down three floors. Andy was a little surprised at how quiet the elevator ran, barely even hearing the sound of it moving before the doors opened onto the hidden basement floor.

Once they’d opened, Lexi and Melody poked their heads out, each looking in an opposing direction down the hallway. The basement, at least, still had its lights on. Once they were satisfied it was clear, Lexi reached in and flicked the elevator into the ‘hold’ position, so the doors wouldn’t close and it wouldn’t leave the floor. Then they resumed moving, keeping Andy and Piper (and Muninn) in the center of the formation, until they reached the bunker door.

Lexi raised her left fist and banged on the heavy door twice, then once, then four times in quick succession, which apparently was the signal to open the door, everyone being ushered into the bunker room quickly, with the door being slammed shut and rebolted back into place.

The downstairs Master Bedroom was also affectionately referred to as the bunker, and they’d just been in it a few hours ago for Piper to take her shower. It was large enough to double as a panic room for the entire Team, with one massive bed, plus plenty of storage. There were also only three doors in and out of the place – one into the hallway, one into the giant attached bathroom and the other directly into the armory. And it looked like several of his Team had taken advantage of that connection, as he could see many of his partners were armed. The room that had been completely empty just three or four hours ago now held everyone in the Team, as well as his two cats, Maya’s two dogs and a basinet for the baby to sleep in.

Andy pulled his phone out of his pocket and terminated the call as Emily was the first to hug him and hug him hard. “Thank heavens you’re alright, Andrew,” she said to him, her tiny British body shaking with fear.

“Okay, someone please tell me what the hell is going on,” Andy said as he watched Piper set Muninn down with Huginn, the two cats seemingly nonplussed by whatever was happening.

“Niko, can you pull it up on the screen?” Lexi said. She reached over to the shelf they’d laid out a dozen or so weapons on and grabbed the Colt .45 that was sitting there, handing it over to Andy. “Remember your training.”

Since the incident outside of the book signing last year, Andy had spent an hour a day, five days a week, whenever he was at home, down with Lexi or Melody in their firing range, learning how to shoot. He didn’t want anything complicated, nothing too powerful, but he also didn’t want to make an ass of himself if it came down to a firefight, and so, after some long discussions with Lexi, she had agreed to teach him how to use a gun, pistols only. The weapon felt comfortable in his hands, even if he’d never pointed it at a living thing before.

Niko had a tablet in her hand and with a few taps, one of the walls of the room came to life, turning into a bevy of monitors, showing security cameras from all around the grounds,

cycling through them before stopping on one, showing a portion of the metal barred fence that surrounded the perimeter, except that a couple of the bars had been removed and a path in had been made. “We’ve got intruders on the grounds,” she said. “I’ve already called it in to the base, and they have troops heading over here now, except that there’s about half a dozen other places in New Eden reporting infiltrations onto grounds, so they’re being forced to spread a little thin. They want us to hunker down where we are and just wait for the cavalry to show up.”

“Have you been able to spot anybody?”

“We lost a couple of cameras outside the pool house, but so far we hav—”

“Boss, look,” Lexi said, pointing to one of the monitors displayed on the wall. It was a camera displaying the pool, and there were three female figures dressed in all black scurrying across the deck, running towards the building. They were carrying military rifles, and each had a backpack strapped to them, one of them having a much bigger backpack than the other two. “We’ve got company.”

“Is this the Russians again?” Andy asked, trying to glean information from the cameras, when it was clear the team was doing everything they could to stay out of vision, but hadn’t picked up on all of the cameras, or, more likely, had realized they would pass in front of some cameras on approach, and had chosen the ones that would give the least level of detail.

“Doesn’t look like them. Not their preferred rifle, not their preferred movement tactic,” Lexi said, also scrutinizing the image. “The Pacific wasn’t really my theatre, but that feels like a Chinese squad to me.”

“What the fuck are the Chinese doing in New Eden?” Melody asked.

“What the fuck are the Chinese doing at *my* house?” Andy countered.

“And why are there *two* teams of them?” Niko asked, pointing to another screen, as a second team seemed to be rounding the pool house, weapons at the ready, moving to follow the same path as the first, albeit quite a bit slower, the two teams unable to see each other, no signs of radios or other communication between them.